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History

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Socialist Utopia

"Out of the crooked timbre of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." Kant's virulent words seem to breath germ-ridden ruin to the Socialist Utopia. Whether such a place might actually be established is, of course, a conditional question. We might more appropriately first inquire if such a place can even be dreamed, or is the dream destined to become, in mid-vision, a dreaded nightmare?

Setting aside the ethico-religious Utopias of old testament Prophets, the Utopianism of Jesus, of Saint Augustine's "City of God"; all of which are formulated and entrenched within religious doctrine and so by practical definition exclusionary and so necessarily dystopian to the heretic, we are left with Plato's *Republic* as the inaugural dwelling place of utopianism.

A book featuring a purely pink cover is surely a rare and wonderful thing. Such is the case with *The Utopian Visions of Charles Fourier*, a volume certainly worth its weight in pink. In the historical community of utopias, built in that region which surely feature the *Republic* as its church, Fourier's offers an architecture that is remarkable in its

idiosyncrasy, with seven back doors and no front. The roof is made of string.

Fourier is decidedly a law unto himself, bemoaning all philosophers without, we might say, his unique pinkness; as eccentric in his individuality as he is individual in his eccentricity. Like all other utopianists, however, he is a product of his times. An efficient utopianist is able to recognise problems of his period; a proficient utopianist is able to escape the confines of contemporaneity and discover solutions in a non-temporal realm. Plato's topless women elite, exercising alongside their male counterparts and religious toleration and communism in More's *Utopia* are but two reasonable examples. If playing out of time is the mark of a bad musician, thinking out of time is the mark of a true utopianist. Fourier sought not so much the improvement of civilisation, but rather its absolute destruction, a radical approach revealing an ability to think outside of conventional thought. His voluminous works were no abstract theorems, but detailed blue-prints meant to provide for the actualisation of a new era in human habitation. Fourier's utopia, the author insists, is not based upon hypothesis but upon discovery.

Newton's laws of attraction--gravity--in the physical universe were, according to Fourier, merely a preamble to his more momentous discovery of a similar force at play in the social, animal and organic realms. This force he labelled "the law of passionate attraction";(215) a

fundamental principle controlling all human activity. Fourier recognised no harmful passions, nor unhealthy desires, believing only that it is suppression of such wherein lies the evil. Fourier further suggests that Nature intended all man's desires to be gratified, with this universal gratification providing the key to universal harmony. Showing a clear bias towards natural man over his civilised counterpart, Fourier seems to echo Rousseau's "On the Social Contract" and, perhaps more particularly, "Origin of Inequality."

What good are industrial prowess and economic theory if the results they yield are always contrary to their premises and if they leave the people worse off than the savages who, even when poor, have a triple advantage over our wage earners: liberty, freedom from worry, and the hope of abundance after a good hunt.(125)

But the similarity is only in general terms: for Rousseau, civilisation had corrupted man by encouraging luxury, inequality and idleness. Fourier, alternately, believes the pursuit of luxury and conditional inequality key aspects of his utopia. As for idleness, it is seen as man's reasonable response to the profitless mindless soul destroying labour of the poor. Natural man, in a state of liberty, is inclined to do right; wrongful behaviour stems from the frustration of desires, suppressed by the hypocritical morality of civilisation.

The passions then should be cultivated rather than suppressed. With a fondness for numeration which at times is suggestive of mathematical madness, Fourier proclaims twelve passions divided into three classes. The first class are the cravings of the five senses which exercise control over the dominion of self. The second class consists of four appetites of the soul, which result in the tendency of association: the groups of friendship, love, family and ambition or corporation. The third and final class is somewhat more convoluted and consists of the desire for intrigue, planning and contriving (cabalistic), resulting in emulation between groups; the desire for variety and change and novelty (pappilone), stimulating the senses and soul; the desire for union (composite), a state of elation achieved by the simultaneous satisfaction of several desires. All twelve passions, granted the free reign of satisfaction, unite together into one controlling impelling force (harmonism) which harmonises the contentment of the individual with the contentment of the social group; thus, pursuit of self interest is inextricably tied to pursuit of general interest. Since desires are largely suppressed or nurtured individually in actual society, the force of harmonism has never been experienced, and awaits to citizens of Harmony--the chosen appellation of Fourier's utopia.

If the "law of passionate attraction" seems somewhat *Occamistic* and nebulous at this point, its application in the social dynamics of Harmony renders it both striking and

supremely inventive--as well as more comprehensible; and, as we venture into a vision almost entirely outside normal perspective, the foundation provided by the "law of passionate attraction" will become quite apparent, for it is everywhere and touches upon all aspects of life.

The *natural* inclination of men to co-operate and work for a mutual good is greatly dependent upon an environment which fosters such propensities, with the social environment of conventional capitalism antipodal to this goal. The basic social unit of Harmony is the Phalanx, in which passions have free play. The Phalanx is both a centre of habitation and work, consisting of both agricultural and industrial activities and governed by managers chosen by the inhabitants. The number of people residing in the Phalanx is particularly vital and dependent upon the twelve passion. Since these passions can be combined in eight hundred and twenty different ways--the omission of any possible combination in a representative worker resulting in dissonance--the ideal number lies between eight hundred and twenty and two thousand. Within this number, further sub groups are called for, in conformity to Fourier's theories of group psychology. Between seven and nine individuals of similar taste form the smallest unit, with this harmonious collection then becoming part of a group of twenty-four to thirty two and finally, at the highest level, the Phalanx representing the whole. Such numeric detail often obscures sense behind nonsense, much as the wood proverbially cannot

be seen for the trees. After we chuckle our chuckle, we should perhaps cast aside Fourier's manic and seemingly mendacious details and acknowledge, here as elsewhere, the fundamental *truthness* behind venial abstruseness. The imperative of social grouping in Harmony lies in the universal and the specific: firstly, a general environment--essentially all aspects of Harmony--is created in which the gratification of person passions is congruous to general welfare; secondly, sub-groups within each Phalanx are composed of members whose dispositions are mutually beneficial. The whole thing, when we examine the general rather than the specific, smacks of common sense and seems entirely workable.

Like all else, work in the Phalanx is a pleasurable pursuit. In response to the tedium Fourier experienced in his own employment, as well as that of the peasant and industrial workers he observed, work in the Phalanx is always in accord with the predilections of the workers.

In the streets of our large cities you can see strong men busy shelling peas, peeling vegetables, and cutting paper to make candy wrappers. These trifling tasks should be performed by the groups of little children who help out in the kitchens and workshops.(129)

Essentially, division of labour in Harmony pays attention to both individual temperament and individual suitability. Besides this, no task is to be pursued for any period of

time exceeding two hours, eliminating the possibility of fatuous repetition. Further, pleasure is provided by the comradeship of that primary group of between seven and nine persons, which is not only the basic social unit but work unit also. With work so attractive, and with the friendly competition achieved by individuals attempting to distinguish themselves amongst one another, production would demonstrate an exponential increase over that of a purely capitalist system.

The concept of work meaning pleasure seems somewhat paradoxical to many, and even Fourier suggests that certain tasks are always abhorrent to adult workers. A problem to Fourier though is never more than a solution in the making: boys, he suggests, between the ages of nine and fifteen commonly take great pleasure in associating with filth. Filth and young boys are often in perfect harmony. Such boys as these then will perform--with pleasure and zeal--such tasks as digging the dung heap and cleaning out the sewers. In this remarkable and inadvertently jocose offering, Fourier again confounds wisdom with detail. Although we might question the interpretation of boyhood partiality to filth, we might also question the original premise, for certainly certain individuals irrespective of age and gender might find such labour pleasurable and the two hour limit would certainly support the possibility of the pleasant aspect in such conventionally unpleasant tasks--though again we must take exception to the rigidity of his numerology.

Nevertheless, the problem of tedium in manufacturing labour is one which is presently being addressed by many companies and the solution essayed is that offered by Fourier. His obsessive numerology and attention to detail often leads him and the reader up the garden path, where pink pansies replace red roses and weeds are conscientiously nurtured. Nevertheless, it can hardly escape our notice that once again there seems a general method to the madness.

Even with the positive effects of group dynamics, as we saw in the stratified system of social organisation; the pleasure factor of likeable labour for the like-minded; the financial incentive of varied pay scales, Fourier's claim to augment productivity exponentially is dependent also upon a restructuring of fundamental systems of production. Contemporary capitalism provided Fourier with ample examples of how production should not be managed: where rural communities utilised multiple storage bins without sufficient precautions against spoilage and fire, rather than establishing one vast well-built communal granary; where villages featured dozens of individual ovens wasting fuel and causing deforestation, instead of an efficient communal oven.

As we see from the above examples, Fourier displays a bias towards ruralism. Where he does mention industry, it is often in condemnation of actual conditions with only brief and passing alternatives offered. This is not to say that he was in any respect of the ludite philosophy, but merely that

Harmony was envisioned more as a garden with workers than as workers with gardens.

Thus, thanks to the bragging perfectibilities of industrialism and productionism, slavery has been established in fact . . .(123)

Unlike a number of utopianists, Fourier insists, as mentioned above, upon the perpetuation and unequal payment of moneys for work rendered. Money, after all, is a source of pleasure, and Harmony is--like the colour pink--the perfect unimpeded pursuit of pleasure. The system of remuneration is complex: suffice to say, a share of the communal dividend is granted to each worker, its size dependent upon the nature of the work performed--strenuous and less pleasant tasks offering greater emolument--as well as upon the workers contribution to harmony in Harmony. Besides this, a fixed minimum allowance exists for those whose chief pleasure is to avoid all nature of employment. The Phalanx allows also the payment of interest and ownership of private property--within the limits of communal use--for both are a source of pleasure and an object of passion.

After labour comes love.

If one compares the immense desires with our limited means of satisfying them, it seems as if God has acted unwisely in endowing us with passions so eager for pleasure, passions that seems created to torment us by exciting a thousand

desires, nine-tenths of which we cannot satisfy so long as the civilised order lasts.

It is for this reason that the moralists aspire to correct the work of God . . .(215)

It must already be understood that the sovereignty of passion particular to the Phalanx must bring to its very bosom the concept of free love. Since passionate attraction is an omnipresent force, suppression and subjugation to reason is both futile and harmful. Free love is perhaps the most notable and extravagant manifestation of Fourier's "Theory of Passionate Attractions." Just as there is a minimum cash payment granted members of the Phalanx, similarly there is a minimum quota of sexual activity guaranteed. But we should not read "free" as anarchistic, for like all things in Harmony, order is paramount. Accordingly, government plays an important role in sexual liaisons. The "affairs" of every Phalanx are run by an elaborate hierarchy of officials, the nomenclature of which is delightfully subversive: high priests, pontiffs, matrons, confessors, fairies, fakirs and genies. Such dignitaries serve at the evening Courts of Love, where fetes and orgies are organised and amorous ties formed. Perhaps the most interesting position is that of confessor. Confessors, aided by psychologists, are elderly men and women who periodically interview member of the Phalanx in order to ascertain their sexual profile. A prominent feature of member's passports, this profile allows travellers to easily encounter

compatible sex partners in foreign Phalanx. Besides this function, confessors also minister *directly* to the *urgent* needs of their younger clients. Harmony would thus provide a rich sexual life, employment and prestige to elderly persons who are often the most oppressed in society.

The only sex not permitted in the libertarian heaven is of the abusive type in which a person is used against his will. Persons with particularly unusual perversions would meet like-minded individuals at international conventions which would be pilgrimages as sacred for them " . . . as the journey to Mecca is for Muslims."(387)

Marriage, the monotonous monogamous sacrificial table of satisfying sex, is seen as institutionalised bondage from which women must be emancipated--though it does, like much else, remain a matter of personal choice.

Although women of Harmony are emancipated and granted a rank equitable with the labour performed, this is not to suggest that they are treated exactly as men. Fourier recognises an innate difference between the sexes, and to treat one as the other would be to mistreat both. It is the individual who chooses work most fitting to his capacity, and though this takes precedence, certain tasks seems gender specific. Nevertheless, Fourier recognises the congenital discrimination of his times:

Masculine jealousy has burst out especially against women writers; philosophy has refused them academic honours and has consigned them

ignominiously to the tasks of housekeeping.(381)

Unlike most traditional utopias, Fourier devised a system not merely for edification and contemplation, spending much of his life in the promotion of his ideas in a deliberate effort to see them realised. Indeed, a number of trial communities were created. Their eventual failure was due, according to Fourier, to insufficient financial backing during the formative stages, and also deviations from his precise and comprehensive blueprint.

To the question: can it work? the answer clearly answers more about the answerer than it does about the answer itself. If Fourier seems at times insane, swept away in a storm of *schwärmerei*, lost in the details of a vast imagining, he was, paradoxically, also something of a realist. Fourier recognised that to improve man we must improve man, rather than improve what we wish man might be. Since people are essentially self-seeking, improvement must tap this fundamental and bring it to positive use, where improvement of the individual is concomitant to improvement of the general. Like Rousseau, Fourier denied man's predominantly rational nature, believing rather that his behaviour is determined by instinctive drives. Rousseau utilises reductionism, particularly in "On the Social Contract" suggesting that the only natural virtue is pity; and, since pity precedes reason, it therefore serves the

role of offering a more fundamental source upon which to base our actions. Fourier's methodology is essentially the opposite, number and listing the million and one forces that motivate men and women. Further, where Rousseau believes social life necessitates individual restraint, Fourier suggests that it is restraint that corrupts social life.

Fourier's utopia grew not simply from the seeds of fancy but from a reactionary temperament. Without doubt, Fourier is an excessive thinker, displayed not only in the minutia of his ponderings but also in expression of contemporary life:

In winter-time he sleeps on a pile of leaves which rapidly turns into a worm infested compost heap. When his family wakes up, they have to pull the worms out of their flesh. The food served in these huts is just as elegant as the furniture.(126)

It seems clear though that the unconventional mind is ever want to display excessiveness and obsessiveness in one form or another, and if we turn away in shock from the shocking, then who knows what inspiration we might miss--and at what cost to the future.

Works Cited

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